

COLOMBIA

Splinters in the Front

For months, the problems of Colombia have been growing from serious to worse. Under President Guillermo León Valencia, the cost of living has soared 50%, the country's foreign debt has doubled to \$750 million, unemployment is rising dangerously, and a wave of Castroite kidnappings has terrorized both city and countryside (TIME, March 19). Now all of these pale beside a grave new political concern. Colombia's National Front, formed in 1958 to make peace between the warring Liberal and Conservative parties, is in danger of imminent collapse.

The terms of the agreement call for Liberals and Conservatives to alternate the presidency every four years, while splitting Cabinet posts and congressional seats down the middle. Under the Front's first President, Alberto Lleras Camargo, a Liberal widely respected by all factions, the arrangement seemed to be working well enough. Since he left office in 1962, differences among the Front's factions have sharpened and deepened.

Valencia's lackluster Conservative government is partly to blame. Beyond that, there has long been widespread feeling against the Front's 1966 candidate—Carlos Lleras Restrepo, a longtime Liberal firebrand and a man with many enemies. This month, the Front's divisions exploded into the open when a splinter faction of Valencia's own Conservative Party and a dissident Liberal group joined with followers of ex-Dictator Gustavo Rojas Pinilla to form an anti-Front coalition. With 126 of Congress' 282 seats, the coalition has more than the one-third necessary to block all government legislation and become, as Valencia himself admits, "unbearable opposition." Rojas seeks more than that. "In the congressional elections next March," he vows, "we will get enough votes to void the National Front and move right into the Presidential Palace."

How long the dissidents will hang together—and how many votes they can muster on their own—is open to serious doubt. As of last week, they had succeeded in at least one major objective: forcing the resignation of Lleras Restrepo as the Front's presidential candidate in 1966. "I am the victim of an intense and obstinate propaganda campaign to destroy the country's institutions," said Lleras Restrepo. And sure enough, its institutions were growing shakier by the day. Toward week's end, university students protesting U.S. intervention in the Dominican Republic went on a seven-hour rampage in Bogotá, slinging stones and Molotov cocktails, breaking windows in a U.S.-Colombian cultural center, and taking over two radio stations. When police finally restored order, more than 100 people were injured. Valencia promptly seized upon the riot



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Less luster for the arrangement.

as an excuse to declare a state of siege.

A far better solution, the antigovernment coalition feels, would be Valencia's resignation. "Anyone who wants to remove me from San Carlos Palace," he said, "will have to pause in the patio to shoot me first."